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# Brothers in musical arms: the wartime correspondence of Dmitrii Shostakovich and Henry Wood

## Abstract

Wartime correspondence between the conductor Sir Henry Wood and the composer Dmitrii Shostakovich marks the earliest point of Anglo-Soviet musical exchange at the highest artistic levels. Though short-lived due to Wood's death in 1944, the correspondence shows how genuine warmth and mutual regard could co-exist with a relationship that was brokered by government officials. Other archive sources around them reveal the varying shades of cynicism and sincerity that underpinned the whole project of wartime cultural exchange between Britain and the Soviet Union. Though this rendered Anglo-Soviet connections inescapably underpinned by political motivations, it could not prevent genuine artistic and personal relationships from forming, albeit on a limited basis. The result, in this case, was a brief correspondence that acted as a crucial element of goodwill in Anglo-Soviet diplomacy during the war.

Keywords (5) Shostakovich, Henry Wood, VOKS, wartime, Soviet

Forging so-called “soft power” cultural relationships between the Soviet Union and Western nations during the Stalin period and the Cold War depended on a complex interplay of personal and political motivations. As Michael David-Fox has argued, those “friends of the Soviet Union” from the pre-war era were courted on terms of political expedience (David-Fox: 2012, p. 316). When, during the 1920s and early 30s, the Soviet Union valued the support of prominent left-wing European intellectuals, organised visits to the USSR by high-profile writers such as Romain Rolland and George Bernard Shaw resulted in favourable propaganda back in their native countries. By the later 1930s that practice had effectively ended, though organised tours to the Soviet Union continued, meaning that although the obvious “courting” of foreign intellectuals was over, lower-profile contacts could still carry on (see Louise Wiggins’ article on the Alan Bush-Grigori Shneerson correspondence in this journal), right up to the outbreak of the war on Soviet territory in 1941 (Stern: 2007, David-

Fox: 2012, Fayet: 2014). The war years provided a unique window of opportunity for new relationships to be forged between Soviet and British artists; artists from both the Soviet Union and Great Britain wrote to each other during this period expressing professional solidarity, admiration and a wish for friendship to be established beyond the war years.<sup>1</sup> This article will examine one such relationship between musicians: a modest but important body of correspondence between the foremost Soviet composer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dmitrii Shostakovich, and the leading British conductor of the time, Sir Henry Wood.

With the known exception of the letters between the British Communist composer Alan Bush and the VOKS's music head, Grigorii Shneerson (Fairclough and Wiggins, 2016), none of the many wartime correspondences initiated between British and Soviet musicians continued past 1945, at least so far as I have been able to discover in the VOKS files in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF - *Gosudarstvennii Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii*)<sup>2</sup>, and few were in any way substantial. The letters between Henry Wood and Shostakovich, however, shows a burgeoning relationship between a British musician and a Soviet composer that could have been long-lasting and sincere, had either the political climate or the physical reality (Wood died in 1944) permitted it. While hardly transcending their official function as the artistic goodwill behind the official brokerage, the Wood-Shostakovich letters show details of how the wartime effort of cultural exchange was played out between individual musicians. They show that cultural diplomacy at this time was not necessarily guided only by political motivations - those motivations were there, facilitating, encouraging and monitoring – but sat alongside the desire for cultural exchange on behalf of both Soviet and British musicians.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the correspondence may be found in GARF, f. 5283 (files on English and American artists).

<sup>2</sup> VOKS = Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kul'turnoi Sviasi s zagranitsei (All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries)

Although government departments on both Soviet and British sides were the primary initiators of exchanges during this allied period, there were a few musicians who eagerly seized the chance for deeper acquaintance. Most exchanges – those preserved in the VOKS papers of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) - dried up very quickly; attempts to engage Ralph Vaughan-Williams, the leading British composer of the period, notably failed, as warm expressions of regard met with polite two-line replies.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Shostakovich himself was hardly the most obvious person to strike up a correspondence with a British musician. He was a famously reticent person in any case, and he took very little interest in British music until he encountered the music of Benjamin Britten (Fay: 2000, 219). Unlike Sergei Prokofiev, who had performed in London during his time working with Sergei Diaghilev and the *Ballets Russes* and who still had contacts there, Shostakovich had never been to Britain; in fact, he had scarcely been abroad at all, since his rise to fame in the 1930s coincided with the gradual choking off of travel to Western countries. Whether prompted by VOKS or not - the records in GARF do not preserve any instruction from officials to Shostakovich to begin the correspondence - Shostakovich initiated their personal contact in May 1943 by sending Wood an expensively-bound signed edition of his “Leningrad” Symphony, which Wood had conducted at the London Proms in 1942.<sup>4</sup> Wood was, in fact, the first foreign conductor to perform it outside the Soviet Union, making this not simply another Western performance of a Soviet work, but a genuinely significant event in Anglo-Soviet musical relations.

The role of VOKS in brokering these wartime musical friendships still requires further research, but it is important to note that before the war, VOKS’s role in the musical sphere was quite restricted – far more so than in the sphere of literature and art, where it was

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<sup>3</sup> GARF. F. 5283, op. 15 dd. 63, 72.

<sup>4</sup> See the covering letter written by the VOKS music representative Lidia Kislova, GARF f. 5283, d. 134, l. 33, letter dated 6.5.43.

involved in extremely high-profile visits from the West. In music this situation was very different; bodies such as the Moscow and Leningrad Philharmonias and, in the 1920s, the Association for Contemporary Music, made numerous invitations to foreign musicians, not necessarily through VOKS, though all high-profile events required the assistance (and implicitly the permission) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NKID) which was linked with the OGPU (later with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, NKVD). Even in cases where visits seem to have been brokered by fellow artists, higher-level political assistance was required at several levels. Sergei Prokofiev's diary from his Soviet trip in 1927 describes the administrative support he received from Maxim Litvinov, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, but also describes the sudden appearance of an OGPU officer part-way through his visit, who boasted that he could have arranged everything without Litvinov's help. Additionally, Prokofiev enjoyed constant administrative support from Arnold Tsukker, an administrator for the famous conductorless ensemble, Persimfans (and also a secretary in the Central Committee), who was tasked with providing basic assistance to Prokofiev throughout his visit (Phillips: 2012, pp. 436, 439, 448). This untidy (and doubtless often competitive) manner of managing high-level musical visits reflected precisely the complex network of administrative structures and hierarchies that was activated when a particular individual or organization mooted the idea of such a visit. It also reflected the difference between government organizations like VOKS and professional musical institutions in the 1920s and 30s: the files in GARF show clearly that, before 1941, VOKS's work with foreign musicians was nothing like as important as it became during the war, being concerned – at least in the case of relations with British musicians – largely with group visits and delegations, of which a British composer might choose to be a part (as in the case of Alan Bush, who visited in 1938 and 1939) and correspondence with amateur musicians, facilitated by the London-based non-governmental Society for Cultural Relations with the USSR (SCR).

The relative unimportance of VOKS to musical exchange in the pre-war years also reflects the degree to which Soviet musical visits were initiated by professional musical organizations rather than government departments. Soviet musical life in the 1920s and 30s was inherently “international” in a manner that was not equalled in other artistic spheres, notwithstanding the popularity of foreign authors and artists in those decades (Clark: 2011; Stern: 2007). The standard practice of all orchestras across the globe was, and still is, to play works from different historical periods and from different countries, and the Soviet Union did not deviate from this, making the day-to-day presence of music in the Soviet Union inherently international. This was not merely in the sense of maintaining a “museum culture”: until the late 1930s, contemporary Western music formed a key part of the Moscow and Leningrad Philharmonias’ repertoire. Some of the visiting foreign musicians who brought new European music with them would play a major role in Soviet musical life: of the substantial list of foreign conductors working in Moscow, Leningrad and elsewhere in the 1920s and 30s, five (Fritz Stiedry, Heinz Unger, Eugen Szenkar, Oskar Fried and Kurt Sanderling) were on long-term contracts, and Fried and Sanderling settled permanently in the Soviet Union (or at least until the post-Stalin era in Sanderling’s case). In addition to conductors, there were visiting musicians from America: the baritone Lawrence Tibbett, tenor Roland Hayes and the contralto Marian Anderson all visited in the 1930s, along with an assortment of jazz ensembles and the avant-garde composer Henry Cowell in 1929 (Dubinets: 2003). The earliest composers to visit were Darius Milhaud and Alfredo Casella, who came in 1926, with Alban Berg following a year later and Béla Bartók coming in 1929 (Frolova-Walker and Walker: 2012; Fairclough: 2016, p. 60).

One undeniable fact among all this “international” music-making in the Soviet Union is that the focus of Soviet attention was almost exclusively European. American artists – and especially popular music entertainers – were widely admired, but for serious music intended

for Philharmonia concerts, Soviet sights were set on Western European nations, chiefly France, Germany and Italy. Performers from America visiting the Philharmonias sang older European music, not contemporary American works.<sup>5</sup> Conspicuous by their absence are composers from Britain, America or even Scandinavia – early 20<sup>th</sup>-century symphonists such as Carl Nielsen, Jean Sibelius, Aaron Copland, Roy Harris, Ralph Vaughan-Williams and Edward Elgar were barely on the Philharmonias' radar. This is largely because those who led the organizations were neither strongly interested in those composers, nor very knowledgeable about their music. To give just one example of the attitudes held in Leningrad most influential circles in the mid-1930s: at a symposium held to discuss the future of the Soviet symphony in 1935 Shostakovich's friend Ivan Sollertinskii, who helped shape the Leningrad Philharmonia programming throughout the 1930s and directed their repertoire department from 1939, openly sneered at his colleague Konstantin Kuznetsov's old-fashioned support for English symphonists and the English composer Constant Lambert's enthusiasm for Sibelius (Sollertinskii: 1935, 28). British music in particular had no champions in Russia, since those who might have imported it (such as Albert Coates, the Russian-born conductor of English parents, or Nikolai Malko, who spent a substantial amount of time in Britain) had both left the Soviet Union by 1919 and 1931 respectively. This lack of awareness immediately threw Soviet musicians into a disadvantageous position at the start of the wartime alliance. Soviet orchestras were not in a strong position to begin a reciprocation of the various friendly gestures made on the British side: an upsurge in broadcasts of Russian and Soviet music on the BBC began in mid-1941, and the year ended with a celebratory concert for Stalin's birthday at the Royal Albert Hall conducted by Sir Henry Wood on 21 December.

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<sup>5</sup> Records were consulted in the St Petersburg Philharmonia Archive (St Petersburg) and the Moscow Philharmonia collection in RGALI (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art), f. 2922.

Once the Soviet Union and Britain became allies, VOKS assumed management of all Anglo-Soviet musical contact, from the lowly (to which they were long accustomed) to the most distinguished. On the British side, procedures for approaching Soviet musicians appear on the surface to be more informal – a letter written by a British musician would simply be passed to the Soviet Embassy in London, and thus make its way to the VOKS representative, to the Chairman of the Committee on Arts Affairs Mikhail Khrapchenko and ultimately to Viacheslav Molotov (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1939-1949) and the Politburo, if appropriate (for example, if considering an exchange of musicians rather than just music). Yet the impetus for establishing contact with Soviet musicians typically still originated from the British Government, and this was emphatically the case with the Wood-Shostakovich letters. The London-based SCR (Society for Cultural Relations) had a long history of dealing with VOKS in the 1930s, including handling correspondence from both amateur and professional musicians (such as the composers Alan Bush and Rutland Boughton) but between 1941-45 it was to a large extent displaced – deliberately so - by the British government, who seized the initiative to work directly with VOKS representatives, with the Sovinformburo (created in 1941 to manage propaganda during the war) who oversaw VOKS's work during the war, and, to a very modest degree, with Mikhail Khrapchenko as Head of the Committee on Arts Affairs.<sup>6</sup> Supplanting the SCR was a deliberate government strategy during wartime, since officials in the Foreign Office believed the society to be an organization of dedicated communists and naïve fellow-travellers that was vulnerable to infiltration by Moscow (Fairclough: 2013, p. 38). This meant that the British government could avoid what it believed was the Soviet controllers of the SCR gaining an advantage in cultural propaganda during the war. Their way of gathering cultural exchange in-house was to

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<sup>6</sup> For a good account of the SCR and its foundation, see Emily Lygo, 'Promoting Soviet Culture in Britain: The History of the Society for Cultural Relations between the Peoples of the British Commonwealth and the USSR, 1924-1945' *Modern Language Review* vol. 108, no. 2 (2013): 571-96.



turn over all such work to the newly-revived Ministry of Information in Whitehall, a temporary ministry that had first arisen at the end of the First World War (approximately from 1918-1919) and which was resurrected from 1938 to 1946, initially following the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. Like its Soviet counterpart the Sovinformburo, its chief responsibility was publicity and propaganda work, both in Britain and in Allied countries and, from June 1941, this of course included the Soviet Union.

### **Earliest contact**

Wartime contact between British and Soviet musicians was initiated by the loan of records and scores of British music held at the British Embassy in Moscow to VOKS in either late 1941 or early 1942. The Moscow Composers' Union convened a special meeting to listen to the recordings, some of which were later broadcast.<sup>7</sup> In February 1942, the VOKS official Lidia Kislova wrote to Shostakovich reminding him of his promise to write to English composers thanking them for sending music. Soon afterwards, a letter was drafted, signed by the composers Shostakovich, Reingol'd Glier and Aleksandr Krein and the musicologist Aleksandr Ogolevets.<sup>8</sup> Permission to send it was sought (and received) directly from Molotov, and a draft was sent for checking to Solomon Lozovskii, Deputy Chief of the Soviet Information Bureau (Sovinformburo). Lozovskii requested some minor changes (the exact nature of which will be discussed below), and the letter was then sent in late March-early April 1942. A return package of Soviet music was sent to the Soviet Embassy in London in April.

After these first tentative steps towards building Anglo-Soviet musical relationships, a much bigger event – in the shape of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony – catapulted Soviet

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<sup>7</sup> GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 53, ll. 8-10. Letter from Soviet composers to British composers.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

music into the British public eye. Sir Henry Wood conducted the Western premiere of the symphony in a broadcast recording from London's BBC Maida Vale studios on 22 June 1942 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and then gave the Western concert premiere at the Proms on 29 June in the Royal Albert Hall. Here the chief broker between the Soviet government and Wood seems to have been Ivan Maiskii, Soviet Ambassador in London. On 29 May 1942 Maiskii telegraphed Wood to explain that the score and parts had still not arrived; Wood's undated pencil annotations to the telegram read: "M. Maisky. Thank you for your letter of 29<sup>th</sup> May. I learn this evening from the BBC that Shostakovich 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony arrived [illegible] and that you wish a performance to be arranged for June 22<sup>nd</sup>. To this I am in complete agreement, providing one of our [illegible] orchestras is so disengaged as to allow adequate time for rehearsal and is also free on June 22<sup>nd</sup>,"<sup>9</sup>.

It is of course impossible to gauge the extent of Wood's involvement in planning the forthcoming premiere from these few scribbled lines, but it is worth noting that it was Maiskii, not the BBC or Wood, who suggested the broadcast date, and it was likely to have been Maiskii who recommended Wood as a possible conductor for the London premiere. Indeed, Wood may well have privately asked Maiskii to arrange it for him: Wood had a stronger track record of performing Russian music than any other British conductor at that time, and had a unique history (in Britain) of conducting Soviet music, particularly Shostakovich's: he had included the First Symphony in a special Russian programme at the 1935 Proms (other items included Aleksandr Mosolov's *Zavod* and a performance by Oda Slobodskaia of arias from Shostakovich's opera *The Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District*). He was widely considered (including by officials in the Soviet Embassy) to be the most distinguished conductor in Britain<sup>10</sup>; he was founder of the Promenade Concerts, and he was

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<sup>9</sup> British Library, Henry Wood papers Add. MS. 56426 vol. VIII, p. 1

<sup>10</sup> See letter from the Soviet Embassy official in London, Mr Zonov, to Kislova, 29.10.1943, where he explains that John Barbirolli was 'the foremost conductor in England after Henry Wood' (GARF, f. 5243, op. 15, d. 118, l. 17).

also the personal friend of Rosa Newmarch, the British music critic whose interest in Russian music and friendship with Vladimir Stasov was responsible for some of Wood's programming of Russian music during the summer Promenade season, starting with his early championing of Chaikovskii in the 1890s (Bullock: 2009), not to mention his special concert in honour of Stalin's birthday. Wood's correspondence with Maiskii also shows a warm and fairly informal personal relationship during the years Maiskii was Soviet Ambassador in London (1932-43), with their wives, Lady Jessie Wood and Agnes Maiskii on especially cordial terms (correspondence preserved in Wood papers).

The effect of the "Leningrad" Symphony broadcast and concert was instantaneous: Shostakovich went from a little-known composer in Britain to a household name, although his reputation there as a top-level composer would not be secured until the greater freedoms of the post-Stalin era allowed British critics to hear Soviet musicians perform some of his greatest works (Fairclough: 2007). British government officials apparently soon realized that Henry Wood's commitment to Russian music offered them an ideal opportunity to demonstrate to the Soviet readers of their new (soon to be launched) paper, *Britanskii Soiuznik* (British Ally), how friendly an ally Britain was. The very next day after the London concert premiere of the "Leningrad" Symphony, an official from the Ministry of Information wrote to Wood, asking him to write an address for publication in the Ministry's new paper:

30 June 1942

Ministry of Information

Malet St., London

Dear Sir Henry

You probably know that we are starting in Moscow a British journal to be printed in Russian the purpose of which is to tell the Russians something about our life here in the hope of cementing the friendship now so happily begun and converting it into something solid and permanent that will serve as a basis for world peace in the future.

Would you feel disposed to dictate a letter to the Russian musicians telling them about the concerts which you so successfully organised and which enabled so many thousands of

people to know something of the best music of the world? We would very much appreciate it if you could do this. I very much hope you will feel able to help us in this effort.

Yours very truly [signed, illegible] Russell (Wood Papers, p. 5).

The typescript of Wood's address, which was planned for the very first issue of *Britanskii Soiuznik*, is dated 10 July and obviously reached the Ministry quickly, as they wrote to thank him on 14 July. Though the first issue of the paper has been impossible to trace, Wood's original typescript is preserved in the British Library, and can be reproduced here in full:

"My friends, The Musicians of Russia,

It gives me the greatest pleasure at the inception of the 28<sup>th</sup> season of PROMENADE CONCERTS in London, to send you my warmest greetings in this hour of your country's magnificent stand for freedom.

On June 22<sup>nd</sup> I had the honour of conducting the first performance in this country of the "Leningrad Symphony" by your distinguished confrere, Dimitri Shostakovitch, which was broadcast throughout the world. This performance was repeated a week later on the second night of these Promenade Concerts at the Albert Hall before an audience numbering nearly 6000, which included Mdme Maisky and your esteemed Ambassador [illegible, typed over)] in England.

Your Ambassador and Mdme Maisky were present on both occasions, and the work was received both by Press and public alike with gratifying enthusiasm.

I need hardly say how pleased I am personally to be so closely associated with this important event, following up performances of works for the first time in England by many of your distinguished composers during the past fifty years of my work for furthering the interests of music among the people, via these famous concerts, and the continuation of this policy and close association in the midst of a gigantic war in which we fight side by side as Allies, affords me the deepest personal and musical satisfaction.

You in Russia as we ourselves here, are helping to keep great music alive, and the need was never great. It is a positive contribution at this time to that unshakeable morale on which our mutual hopes of final victory are firmly based.

The public demand for the fine orchestral repertoire was never more evident than now, and when I look back to the first Promenade Concert at Queen's Hall in 1895, when we set out to make the orchestral repertoire known to the people, by instituting eight to ten weeks of nightly concerts at prices within the reach of everybody, and which have endured throughout in spite of the two great wars of aggression, I feel that my life of music has not been in vain, for in no small measure their annual concerts have given our people the opportunity of learning to love fine music which at this time of stress brings comfort and a message of hope that finer thoughts will prevail, and I am confident that they will prevail.

I know that in sending you my friends the musicians of Russia, this message of sincere good will, I am speaking for all your music loving fellow workers in Gt Britain, who join me in wishing you the continued fortitude that will bring a victorious conclusion to your loved country's indomitable fight for the cause of freedom." (Wood Papers, p. 6)

Wood's address produced a flurry of activity in Moscow musical circles. An official response from the Composers' Union was clearly required and on 10 November 1942, two members of the Presidium – Viktor Belyi and Reingol'd Glier – wrote to Wood on behalf of Soviet composers.<sup>11</sup> Wood did not receive their letter until early April 1943, when the Soviet Embassy in London forwarded it to him along with another letter from Ekaterina Alekseeva, director of what was then called the Rubinstein Museum of Musical Culture in Moscow (from 1953 renamed the Glinka State Museum of Musical Culture). Alekseeva's long letter outlined the origins and work of the Museum and requested Wood's co-operation for the forthcoming "Russian Music Abroad" exhibition at the Museum, organised by VOKS.<sup>12</sup> In response to her request for a copy of his memoirs, photographs and programmes of his concerts of Russian music, Wood gladly obliged, responding in a letter of 27 April 1943 with his autobiography – which, it later transpired, was his only remaining copy - *My Life in Music*. His reply to Glier and Belyi, in which he informed them of his plans to perform Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony again in the Prom concerts, then launched a lengthy and cordial correspondence with the VOKS music official Lidia Kislova, who notified him of the imminent arrival in London of some new Soviet scores, and – more importantly – passed on to him an inscribed copy of Shostakovich's "Leningrad" Symphony, with greetings from the composer. This began the slight, but genuinely warm, correspondence between Wood and Shostakovich that ran alongside the flurry of more official letters of fraternal greetings and requests for scores that ensued over the course of 1943-44.

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<sup>11</sup> GARF f. 5283, op. 15, d. 134, l. 30.

<sup>12</sup> GARF f. 5283, op. 15, d. 134, l. 34.

## **The Shostakovich-Wood letters**

Wood's first letter directly addressed to Shostakovich was written in thanks for the gift of the inscribed score. The letters were forwarded to Wood and Shostakovich via VOKS and the respective Embassies in London and Moscow. There are seven letters in total, including three joint letters to and from Shostakovich and the composer Nikolai Miaskovskii (in their capacity as vice-chairs of the VOKS music section), with the following dates:

12 July 1943. Wood to Shostakovich.<sup>13</sup> All translations of the Russian texts are those by the Soviet Embassy in London.

1 September 1943. Shostakovich to Wood.<sup>14</sup>

25 September 1943. Shostakovich and Miaskovskii to Wood.<sup>15</sup>

26 October 1943. Wood to Shostakovich.<sup>16</sup>

27 October 1943. Wood to Shostakovich and Miaskovskii.<sup>17</sup>

Undated in the file but probably 3 January 1944. Shostakovich and Miaskovskii to Wood.<sup>18</sup>

3 January 1944. Shostakovich to Wood.<sup>19</sup>

12 July 1943. Wood to Shostakovich.

My dear Mr Shostakovich

I am honoured that you should have sent me an autographed score of your Seventh Symphony, and would thank you for the kindness. It is undoubtedly much favoured in

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<sup>13</sup> Preserved in GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 134, l. 22 and in the British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Preserved in GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 134, l. 20. Original letter in the British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Preserved in GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 134, l. 28 and in the British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 40.

<sup>16</sup> Preserved in GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 134, l. 17 and in the British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Preserved in GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 134, l. 25 and in the British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> Preserved only in GARF f. 5283 op. 15 d. 134 l. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Preserved only in the British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 67.

England, and with the three performances I gave it last season, it has an appeal that will endear it to the public. I regret that I shall be unable to direct it at the Promenade Concert on July 19<sup>th</sup> when I have it down to be directed by myself, but my doctors forbid for the time being any works of length, as I have been seriously ill. It will of course be played by the BBC Symphony Orchestra with whom I gave the first performance last year, and I know Sir Adrian Boult will give a good account of it.

One of the best performances I have heard of your 1<sup>st</sup> Symphony was with my Royal Academy Senior Student's Orchestra last Term – they loved it, and after twelve rehearsals, it was undoubtedly a rendering worthy of the best traditions of a permanent orchestra. I am hoping to do your Leningrad Symphony with them early next year, during the Spring Term.

I wish you could pay us a visit and direct some of your works during my Jubilee Promenade Concerts next year – we should be so honoured to welcome you, and I know it would be a great public demonstration should we be able to bring this about. Think of it, and let me know if it will be possible.

We are doing several new works by your colleagues, all of which appeal to our public with additional interest, knowing as we do, how you are all shouldering the very exacting problem of thinking in terms of beautiful things such as music is, while your lovely towns and [blank] are being devastated by the crude foe. Our hearts are [illegible] you all, and your thoughts every day, coupled with the hope for a speedy end to this vile war, in which we fight side by side for our freedom and all the better things that this world has to offer. I am convinced, my dear friend of music, that our common interest and understanding of serious music will go far in the coming days of peace to cement a lasting friendship between our peoples, and all our Allies, for there is no swifter and surer message than the unspoken word of music, which understands no diversity of tongues, but is the outcome of a common chord within every human being, and we should do our utmost to see to it that we cherish this thought and further it.

If at any time I can be of service to you and your colleagues, please command me, and I shall find it my pleasure to enter fully into your interests.

With every good wish

Believe me

Sincerely yours

Henry Wood

1 September 1943

Dear Sir Henry

I am very grateful for your kind letter, which gave me great pleasure. I thank you very much for your invitation to visit you next year on the occasion of your Jubilee Promenade Concert and if I can arrange it I shall not fail to avail myself of this opportunity. I wish you the best of

health and happiness. I am sure that the hour is near when our common enemy will be smashed and when our people will be able to resume their upbuilding of culture and art. With all my heart and soul I believe that after the war our art, to which we give all our efforts and abilities, will flourish with redoubled glory and magnificence.

With kindest regards

Yours very sincerely

Dmitri Shostakovich.

25 October 1943

Dear Sir Henry

Please accept our sincere thanks for your friendly letter and for the information about your work and creative plans. We are very glad to hear that you are still devoting so much effort and energy to the performance of Russian music – both classical and contemporary. It is a matter of great pride to us that Russian music possesses such a loyal and staunch friend in the person of such an outstanding master as you. From items that have appeared in the press, and from the material contained in Rose [sic] Newmarch's monograph, we know how many symphonic works by Russian composers had their first performance under your baton. We shall shortly forward you a number of new scores written by our composers in wartime reflecting the events we are living through today and showing embodiment in music of the struggle our people are waging for their honour and independence. Please accept our most heartfelt wishes for continued strength and health in carrying out all the plans you have made. We are sure that the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Promenade Concerts founded by you will be marked by all progressive circles as a glorious jubilee of your work, so highly appreciated and valued by all of us.

Once again please accept our very best regards and good wishes.

Yours truly, N. Miaskovskii and D. Shostakovich

Presidium of Union of Soviet Composers.

26 October 1943

Dear Mr Shostakovich

I have your letter of September 1<sup>st</sup> which has been sent to me through the Soviet Embassy here. Thank you for your good wishes regarding my health and I am relieved to tell you, I am making steady progress towards complete recovery, getting ready to face the vast amount of work which awaits me after Christmas in connection with the Jubilee Celebrations. I can think of no greater pleasure than to welcome you here for my 50<sup>th</sup> year of Promenade Concerts which open at the Royal Albert Hall on June 12<sup>th</sup> and run for nine weeks. London will be there to give you greeting not only in recognition of your Art, but as the living



embodiment of indomitable courage you emulate in your Leningrad Symphony and which has brought you near and dear to us in England. Thank you, for no better example could be found to describe in terms for the purely music lover among us, the heroic resistance of your countrymen and women have and are putting up in the face of that unsheathed violation and wickedness. If you want to come, I am certain we can manage to arrange a suitable date – even at this early stage – come do, and direct the **FIRST PERFORMANCE IN ENGLAND** of your **EIGHTH SYMPHONY**. Let me know, through the Embassy here for it is quicker that way, and more helpful too, as I find M Zonoff's translations of your letters most thorough and expeditious. You will find an audience during my Promenade Concerts such as you will not meet elsewhere – every night some 5-6 thousand people in the Hall, and millions will listen to the broadcast at the same time. I expect of course that you will be invited to allow your works to be given a first performance over the air only, but I am certain that this is not the best medium for such a work, as no critics report – and rarely listen, whereas they will all attend a public event and a vast public – a musical public, acclaims the composer in no uncertain manner. I shall be honoured indeed if this visit shall be agreed and arranged, any time between June 12<sup>th</sup> and August 12<sup>th</sup> 1944. I am delighted to have your photograph – many thanks for sending it to me.

With kindest regards

Believe me, sincerely yours

Henry J. Wood

27 October 1943

My dear Mr Nikolai Myaskovsky and Mr Dmitri Shostakovich,

Your joint letter of September 25<sup>th</sup>, has been sent to me from the Soviet Embassy here. I am delighted to learn that you are sending me some new scores with a view to inclusion for First performance in England during my 50<sup>th</sup> year of Promenade Concerts. I trust these will reach me soon, that I may review them carefully, and with the knowledge that this music comes to us from our friends the Soviet musicians, produced at this time of the heroic stand Russia is making for the future not only of herself, but of all would be free peoples. This alone should make these scores more than interesting, but I know with the fine tradition of music your country is so fortunate in possessing, your works will come from sensitive musicians, urged to speak all that their country is doing and suffering, for their honour and independence.

I am glad you have found Rosa Newmarch's little monograph interesting – she loved the music of Russia just as much as I do myself, and although her book only goes up to the 25<sup>th</sup> year of my Promenade Concerts, it does certainly represent my more than interest in Russian works, an interest that has lived on, and still lives in the works of the composers of Soviet Russia.<sup>20</sup>

I hope so much that you will find it possible to come to us sometime between June 17<sup>th</sup> and August 12<sup>th</sup> 1944 to direct your Eighth Symphony, my dear Mr Shostakovich – I should like to shake you by the hand – a young member of our fraternity of musicians – on the occasion

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<sup>20</sup> This would have been Rosa Newmarch's biography *Henry J. Wood*, London and New York: 1904).

of my adieu from these very strenuous concerts. Of course shall not retire from my [incomplete word] only from these every night concerts, and after all it has been a pretty long life, and it will be good to see them proceeding as usual under the Baton of a younger man, while I am still with my dear friends, the public.

I enclose for your Museums – if you so wish, a Bill announcing the FIRST PERFORMANCE of Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin which I directed in London.

I have been very anxious to make a Record with HMV or Columbia, of some of the new works produced last season at the Promenade Concerts, including your Leningrad Symphony, my dear friend, but unfortunately the London Orchestras cannot come to terms with the Recording Companies and so alas, no records are now being made here, except by one of two of the lesser orchestras, and which I do not direct for Records of this kind. The BBC Recorded my first performance of your Symphony last year, and an excellent Recording it is, but of course that is not for publication.

We watch each day, nay each hour almost, in wonderment at the advances your armies make each day into the enemy positions, and hope with all our hearts that the Allies will purge the world of this curse of war – and the reason which makes this struggle a life and death necessity, and that you brave people will soon be free to rebuild your cities and ruined places, and get going with the education that music so helpfully assists.

With heartfelt good wishes

Sincerely yours,

Henry J. Wood

(no date; probably 3 January 1944)

Dear Sir Henry!

Thank you for your letter of 27 October 1943. We would like to take this opportunity to wish you a happy New Year and wish you, in your Jubilee year, happiness, health and new creative endeavours. All our people hope that 1944 will be the year of a great victory over our common enemy – the year when fascism will be completely defeated and wiped from the face of the earth.

The VOKS music section is taking measures to ensure that the majority of those new scores we send you are written by our composers. Some have already been sent, but the main part of the music will be prepared in a few weeks during the summer, then we will send them to you.

We were greatly interested in the materials which you sent to the Central Museum of Musical Culture. They make a very valuable contribution to our music collection. The books and documents are a testament to the sincere friendship between English and Russian musicians. We are truly happy that now this friendship takes place in the jubilee year. We will be very glad if these works interest you.

With sincere greetings

On behalf of the Music Section of VOKS

N.A. Miaskovskii and D. Shostakovich

3 January 1944

Dear Sir Henry

Please accept my congratulations on the New Year and my best wishes for health, happiness and success in your work.

Thank you very much for the photograph and the letter. It was a great pleasure to receive both the one and the other. Your high regard for my music makes me very happy indeed, as does also your attitude towards the works of my friends – Soviet composers.

Music is our beloved art to which we devote all of our abilities and all our life. Our peoples, joined in a close alliance, are waging a titanic struggle against the enemy of all that is beautiful, the enemy of our art.

It is to be hoped that in 1944 we shall wipe our common enemy from the face of the earth. And then our art will flourish even more luxuriantly, even more colourfully.

With sincere regards, I remain

Yours truly

Dmitrii Shostakovich

There is no record of Wood's reply to Shostakovich or to Miaskovskii; he was still active in early 1944, and indeed planning the 1944 summer season of Promenade Concerts in the hopes of including some new Soviet music therein (the fruits of his exchanges with VOKS), but sadly, he died on 19 August 1944, thus bringing this brief correspondence to a close. The location (and indeed the precise details) of the scores sent to Wood in 1944 is unknown, and they are not included in his papers preserved in the British Library. The inscribed copy of the "Leningrad" Symphony is also lost.

The Shostakovich-Wood letters encompass two kinds of relationship: both professional (that undertaken in Shostakovich's capacity as vice-chair of the VOKS music section, jointly with Miaskovskii) and more personal. Because Wood's involvement with Soviet musicians was not limited to a private exchange with Shostakovich (there are several letters between Wood and Kislova, and others between Wood and the director of the

Rubinstein Museum, as noted above), he had become a well-known and highly regarded figure in Soviet musical circles during the war. In fact, it is true to say that Wood was the only British musician who formed a substantial relationship with his Soviet counterparts (as opposed to with an arts bureaucrat like Shneerson) during this period.. One detail of the Wood-Shostakovich correspondence that is immediately striking is Wood's repeated invitation to Shostakovich to visit, even to conduct his own Eighth Symphony. This would obviously have been an international publicity coup: but Wood's invitation is the more interesting because it is extremely unlikely that the idea came from the Soviet side, for example, from Maiskii. Maiskii would have understood how unlikely it was that Shostakovich would visit Britain, both politically and practically. Travel by boat between London and Leningrad during wartime was even more perilous and difficult than it had been in the pre-war years, since anyone making the journey had to travel in one of the Arctic Convoys round the top of Norway to the northern Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangelsk (and so by train to Leningrad or Moscow – and Leningrad was under siege until January 1944). All the diplomatic post during the war, including music scores and gramophone records, was sent to and from the Soviet Union on these supply ships. A wartime visit was no easy matter, then, making Wood's invitation startling at face value, but it is clear that other wartime plans (such as a visit by the Bolshoi) were made in the expectation of Russians travelling to Britain regardless of the dangers (see Fairclough: 2013).

The final significant event in the relationship between Henry Wood and Soviet musicians came on the occasion of Wood's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday on 3 March 1944. The Music Section of VOKS held a meeting in his honour on his birthday, attended by composers, musicians and musicologists and, from the British side, a minister (John Balfour) from the British Embassy in Moscow. Photographs sent to Wood and preserved in his files show a gathering of around fifty people. They prepared a beautifully printed card with a

congratulatory message, which was then signed by forty musicians and musicologists, including Sergei Prokofiev, Shostakovich (though not present at the meeting due to a prior engagement), Aram Khachaturian, Dmitry Kabalevskii, Reingol'd Glier, Tikhon Khrennikov, Samuil Feinberg, Konstantin Kuznetsov, Igor Belza, Georgii Shneerson, Vano Muradeli and – evidently also present – Agnes Maiskii. A personal birthday telegram from Ivan and Agnes Maiskii followed. Maiskii had been recalled from London in 1943, bringing their personal friendship to a close, and there was no longer a professional obligation to show friendship unless it was sincere; but their telegram conveys a tone of genuine appreciation: “Heartiest congratulations your 75 anniversary. We highly appreciate your valuable work which so much contributed to the cultural rapprochement between our two peoples and I wish you every success in its continuation. Many happy returns. Greetings to your wife. Ivan and Agnes Maisky.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Propaganda context**

To an extent, the Shostakovich-Wood correspondence shows Shostakovich merely fulfilling official duties: at this time he was vice-chair of the Music Section of VOKS and had clear responsibilities to foster cordial relations with Allied musicians. Every stage of their correspondence went through VOKS and the Embassy and it cannot be regarded as evidence of purely personal friendship. The relative warmth of their correspondence, however, represents a mutual respect and sincerity that was undoubtedly lacking from the higher-level political motivations, on either side. Some evidence of the cynicism with which both governments approached cultural rapprochement can be gauged from two sources: the first, a set of detailed corrections sent to Kislova by the Sovinformburo Deputy Solomon Lozovskii

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<sup>21</sup> British Library, Add. MS 56426 vol. VIII, p. 76.

concerning the first letter from Soviet composers to their British counterparts, and the second, a post-war memo by a senior British Foreign Office official, Thomas Brimelow.

Lozovskii's primary objection to the letter in its original form (this version is not preserved in the GARF file) concerned references made by Soviet composers to the "great" English composers Elgar, Purcell and Handel [German composer, but often regarded as English because he spent his mature career in England] and he strongly objected to the implication that Soviet musicians had to rely on the Embassy's collection of recordings in order to acquaint themselves with English music:

If we are to believe the authors of this letter, then they have only been able to hear English music thanks to the records sent by the British Embassy to VOKS. This gives the impression that Soviet composers don't know any English music, and that no one bothered to listen to it even on the radio. Do not blame Soviet composers for their ignorance.... I am not convinced that the characterisation of the English composers Handel, Purcell and Elgar... as great composers corresponds to historical reality.<sup>22</sup>

These were harsh words indeed, and their basis is questionable: it is unlikely that Lozovskii knew enough about music to make this judgement himself. Rather, it suggests nationalistic prejudice on his part; and his response was to prevent Soviet composers from expressing admiration for the music of other cultures. Even if we bear in mind the fact that 20<sup>th</sup>-century British composers were then not especially popular outside their own country – thus accounting for the dismissal of Elgar –, Lozovskii's inclusion of Henry Purcell and the German (naturalised English) Georg Frederik Handel as by implication 'not great' does seem to imply either prejudice or an ignorance of music history, and he was quite ready to impose

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<sup>22</sup> GARF f. 5283 op. 15, d. 53, l. 15.

that ignorance on musicians who knew far better than he which composers were considered great and which were not.<sup>23</sup>

The British government, even if not guilty of quite this level of hostility, was not innocent of underlying propaganda aims either. In the months after the end of the war, the senior Foreign office official Thomas Brimelow noted that political propaganda had lain at the heart of all plans for cultural exchanges in wartime. Resigned to the fact that more direct propaganda was probably impossible on Soviet territory, he drafted a plan to sow seeds for subsequent political enlightenment by urging the British Council to prioritise English language instruction and suggesting that the time had come for the British Council to open a permanent base in Moscow:

Under cover of F.O. [Foreign Office] despatch No.134 of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May 1942 we transmitted to Kuybishev a copy of a British Council memorandum on the work the Council might be expected to undertake if ever it were allowed to set up in the USSR. The memorandum made it clear that the teaching of English is its basic function.

Later in his report, Brimelow notes that during the war, the Ministry of Information held the firm belief that they needed to control all such cultural exchange in lieu of more direct forms of political activity:

The M. of I. no longer maintained their former view that since political propaganda in the USSR was impossible [they] must retain control over cultural activities in order to have a foundation for such political propaganda work as might grow out of these activities.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Lozovskii's dismissal of Handel is especially odd, since he, along with J. S. Bach, had been ostentatiously celebrated in Leningrad and Moscow in 1935 on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their birth. See Fairclough: 2016, pp. 119-127.

<sup>24</sup> National Archives, Kew, FO924/478. n.p.

It is certainly true that, at least in certain sections of the British government, the entire strategy of British cultural exchange with the Soviet Union was propaganda, with the long-term aim of acquainting Soviet citizens with a culture - in particular via the powerful medium of teaching the English language - that British officials (correctly) judged had been hitherto concealed or mis-represented within the Soviet Union. However, it should not be assumed that the British government had a coherent and carefully-guided propaganda strategy. The Russian Department of the Ministry of Information during wartime was headed by Peter Smollett, first revealed by Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky as the NKVD agent Hans Peter Smolka (Andrew and Gordievsky: 1991, p. 334), allegedly recruited by the Soviet spy Kim Philby in the late 1930s. This immediately sounds sinister, as though the whole campaign to recruit Wood as a writer for the Ministry's paper *Britanskii Soiuznik* and perhaps even the diplomatic push to secure Wood's high-profile performance of the 'Leningrad' Symphony was spearheaded by a Soviet spy. Indeed, as Andrew and Gordievsky have shown, Smollett adopted a subtle and effective strategy within his role at the Ministry: he defined their priorities in terms of a combination of combatting anti-Soviet feelings in Britain and curbing "embarrassing" pro-Soviet propaganda from the British Left. His ingenious argument in justifying this was that, by engaging in their own pro-Soviet propaganda, the British government were "stealing the thunder" of more extremist factions, thus weakening their power and influence in favour of the government. Further, Smollett was influential within the BBC, as was the Soviet spy Guy Burgess (BBC producer, 1940-44): Smollett even personally vetted scripts concerning Russia due for broadcast on the Home Service (Andrew and Gordievsky: 1991, p. 337). However, we should also note that Smollett's efforts were almost certainly invisible to Moscow. Boris Volodarsky has recently shown that the KGB head within the London Soviet Embassy (Anatoli Gorskii) had expressly forbidden any use of



Smollett as an agent and Philby's reckless recruitment of him formed part of the background to Moscow's long-standing mistrust of his efforts on their behalf (Volodarsky: 2014, p. 114).

If even the NKVD was not aware of Smollett's efforts, then it is certain that VOKS had no knowledge of them either. Smollett's cover remained intact in Britain and so no-one had any reason to doubt his probity; therefore, whatever his personal intentions and motivations may have been, Smollett quite possibly acted in everyone's interests when it came to musical exchanges, at least. Yet however humble and obscure a Soviet servant Smollett remained, his background means that we are not able to take the Ministry of Information's cultural diplomacy strategy at face value, nor can we even attribute propaganda motives such as Thomas Brimelow's to the use of Henry Wood in initiating Soviet-British musical friendship. Unless further documents come to light, we do not know whether the idea to invite Wood to write for the Ministry paper *Britanskii Soiuznik* came from an "innocent" British official, from the Soviet Ambassador Ivan Maiskii, or, possibly indirectly, from Smollett himself. However, when we look at the actual gains from the Shostakovich-Wood connection, these were undoubtedly greater from the Soviet perspective. Only a handful of concerts of British music were put on by the Philharmonias during the allied years (plus several broadcasts and some less prestigious concerts), whereas the top-ranking British conductors and orchestras performed a whole clutch of Shostakovich symphonies in the same period (the First, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth and Ninth were all performed by major orchestras). Soviet institutions like the Rubinstein (later Glinka) Museum of Musical Culture were able to demonstrate how highly regarded Russian and Soviet music was abroad – and by raising Wood's profile to visitors to their exhibition, they simultaneously reinforced national pride in the greatness of "their" Shostakovich and of Soviet culture generally. Though Shostakovich's British reputation would grow exponentially after 1953 (when Soviet musicians were able to travel to London – see Fairclough: 2007), the war years demonstrated

that the Soviet Union had what Britain (arguably) did not: a truly great symphonic composer whose music was popular with audiences. There could be no single more effective strategy for implying the superior success of Soviet art policies – and the ramifications of this would echo down British musical life throughout the Cold War, as British critics wrestled with the unpopularity of the post-war avant-garde in Britain. On the other hand, Wood's message in *Britanskii Soiuznik* – and the huge popularity of this paper with its Soviet readership generally – was unequivocally beneficial from the British side: aware that Britain, as an Imperial power and capitalist economy, was portrayed as hostile within the Soviet Union before the war, British officials were conscious of the paper's effectiveness in persuading readers that this was not the case. It not only gave Soviet citizens cause to doubt their leaders' veracity from the pre-war years, but also gave them insights into life in modern Britain, which those running the paper evidently hoped would give Soviet people even more cause to doubt the leadership of their own country. In short, Smollett's powerful position within the Ministry should not, perhaps, be taken as evidence that everything issuing from it was manipulated by his Soviet masters. *Britanskii Soiuznik* itself was, after all, closed down on Stalin's orders in the late 1940s, after concerted protest from Soviet officials about its blatant propaganda role (Pechatnov: 1998, p. 297).

The background to the Shostakovich-Wood correspondence was then, above all, a peculiarly complex mixture of Soviet and British propaganda efforts. Clearly, it would be naïve to imagine that Henry Wood and Shostakovich embarked on a personal relationship that significantly transcended these more political ends. It is even true to say that for both the British and Soviet governments, both musicians were used as convenient showpieces to demonstrate the cultural gifts of each nation. However, there is no doubt at all that Wood's esteem for Shostakovich, at least, was both warm and genuine. For musicians on both sides, the window of opportunity presented by the alliance was of course welcome, even if the long-

term musical fruits of their tentative “friendships” were negligible. More sustainable contact would be resumed only after 1953, though Shostakovich would not embark on any personal contact of this kind until another, deeper and more lasting friendship sprang up between himself and Benjamin Britten in the early 1960s (Fay: 2000, p. 219). Both had something tangible to offer the other: Wood his status and influence in British musical life, and his talent as a musician, and Shostakovich some of the greatest symphonic works of the 20th century. Each recognised the others’ value and respected their professional standing. Notwithstanding all the official shenanigans, it was, to some degree, a relationship of equals that brought Shostakovich’s music to an appreciative British public. Just as importantly, it showed Soviet musicians and cultural officials that, despite being prevented from foreign travel and enduring the suffocating xenophobia of High Stalinism and its stifling effect on music-making, Soviet music was admired in the West. As I have shown elsewhere, Soviet cultural officials (including Mikhail Khrapchenko) did not necessarily share the suspicion of foreigners touted by the Politburo, and would have been glad to have welcomed British musicians to Leningrad or Moscow, both before and after the war, but were prevented by higher political forces (Fairclough: 2013 and Fairclough: 2016, pp. 118, 156). Contact with Wood gave VOKS and Soviet musicians reason to feel appreciated and valued: to be part of an international community again, and to hear new foreign music, even if just for a short time before the barriers once more closed the door to their Western colleagues and friends.

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